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SUBJECT: Thai Media Sides with Opposition During Censure Debate

REF: BANGKOK 1951

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SUMMARY

11. (U) The recent censure debate over the performance of Prime Minister Samak's administration has swept the headlines with virtually all local Thai print and broadcast media outlets dedicating significant space and airtime to readouts on the daily action in the House. Local print dailies devoted large portions of their June 25 - June 27 editions to coverage of the speeches and commentary from the floor, while many of the national television stations aired live coverage throughout the day from the parliamentary debate sessions. The dispute over Preah Vihear temple, located on the Thai-Cambodian border, remained in the spotlight of all coverage. Nearly all media outlets seemed to favor the opposition party in the debate, including Thai Rath, the most widely circulated print daily in Thailand, which nearly always shows support for the government in power, including the embattled Samak administration. End Summary.

CENSURE DEBATE DOMINATES THE NEWS

12. (U) Local Thai coverage of the recent censure debate over the performance of Prime Minister Samak's administration dominated both print and broadcast media. The majority of print dailies, as well as television and radio talk shows, devoted significant space and airtime to coverage of the daily parliamentary sessions. Front page exposes, complete with full color photos and virtual play-by-play readouts of the debate action, were featured in the June 25 - June 27 editions of nearly all print dailies. Live coverage from the floor of the Parliament was featured throughout the day on many national broadcast outlets, including state-owned NBT (formerly Channel 11) and TV Thai, Thailand's first and only public broadcasting service.

13. (SBU) The dispute over Preah Vihear was clearly the most visible and hotly debated issue, taking center stage in the media (Ref A). Headlines in the June 25 - June 27 editions of nearly all leading local print dailies made direct reference to the Preah Vihear issue and lead editorials focused solely on the government's controversial actions over this extremely sensitive dispute.

MEDIA PLAYING FAVORITES; SIDING WITH OPPOSITION

14. (SBU) Media coverage of the censure debate has been anything but unbiased and balanced, with the majority of media outlets clearly taking sides with the opposition. Print media, which has always been known to openly criticize the government and enjoys a

particularly antagonistic relationship with Samak himself, has come out fighting against the current administration. The brunt of the punishment has centered on the shoulders of a few, particularly Foreign Minister Noppadon Pattama, with Samak receiving some hard hitting blows as well. For example, the June 25 edition of Khao Sod, a popular Thai-language print daily with a circulation of approximately 700,000, ran the headline "Abhisit, Samak Exchange Heated Debate; Noppadon Injured." The same day's edition of Kom Chad Luek, another widely read Thai-language daily with a readership of about 800,000, ran several articles in which Prime Minister Samak and Foreign Minister Noppadon were harshly criticized on their performance in the House debate.

15. (SBU) Some media observers have expressed concern over the clear bias demonstrated towards the opposition in recent media coverage. During a casual conversation at a June 25 lunch, the business news editor from Thailand's leading English-language business daily, The Nation, told AIO that she was dismayed at the way that the local media was covering the debate, saying it was "very bad that they were taking sides with the opposition," reasoning that the media should be providing more balanced reporting on such an important domestic political issue.

AND THE TWIST

16. (U) In an interesting twist for local Thai print media, Thai Rath, the most widely read print daily in Thailand (readership of approximately 1.5 million) known for its consistent lean towards whichever government is in power, including the embattled Samak administration, came out against the government in this latest tete a tete with the opposition. Its June 25 edition ran headlines about Democrat party leader Abhisit's deft attack on the Samak administration and contained an article that criticized Foreign Minister Noppadon, saying he was not in "good shape from the start"

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where the Preah Vihear temple was concerned. On June 26, Thai Rath also ran a lead editorial reading, "At least this censure debate will remind the Royal Thai Government of the responsibilities and priorities it must set."

COMMENT

17. (SBU) Although the local Thai media, particularly print outlets, have been known to openly criticize the government, we have rarely seen the fervor with which they have shown their disdain of late. It appears that the Samak administration has hit a particularly sensitive nerve with its controversial treatment of the Preah Vihear dispute, and not even the press has remained immune to the nationalistic sensitivities it evokes. On this issue in particular, and on the censure debate as a whole, the media has clearly taken sides and given this round to the opposition. End Comment.

JOHN